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Mr. Carter's relatives

If you had been President of the United States on the unfortunate day last November when a band of young zealots seized the US Embassy in Tehran and held members of the staff as hostages, would you have allowed members of your own staff to turn to your brother as a possible channel for communication with the people in Iran?

Looking back on the event now we can all see that it was probably one of Mr. Carter's bigger mistakes as President. Brother Billy has been an embarrassment to the President from the beginning. His involvement with Libya was only the largest of things he has done which have damaged the President. To use him, or even think of using him, in an extremely delicate foreign policy operation was, to say the least, imprudent.

It was just as imprudent as it was a little earlier in history to agree to let the dethroned Shah of Iran come to New York City for medical treatment. Had Mr. Carter been hard and callous enough to say no to that proposal, he would have avoided all the miseries which have stemmed from that decision. There would have been no seizing of the embassy in Tehran, no taking and holding of hostages, and no temptation to turn to brother Billy for possible help. This whole train of unfortunate events stems from the original failure to see the dangers inherent in letting the former Shah back into the United States when he was settled in Mexico and might have stayed on there indefinitely.

But there were political pressures on the White House to allow the ex-Shah to come to New York for treatment. Mr. Carter would have been accused (loudly, we may be sure) of ingratitude toward an old friend had he refused that permission. He chose the humane and politically safer option and let the man come back, although the specialists who treated him might have been flown to Mexico instead of vice versa.

That spectacle of the former Shah being given special red-carpet treatment by the US government in turn roused suspicions in Iran that Washington was plotting to put him back on the throne of Iran, as had been done once before. And that triggered the attack on the embassy. Then an anguished White House began casting about in desperation for some way, any way, to get in touch with the people in Iran and try to arrange for a release of the hostages.

It was well known at the White House that

brother Billy had become in effect an agent of the Libyan government. He had been to Libya on a visit and had arranged for a return Libyan visit to the United States. He had made something of a spectacle of himself in the process. There was no doubt that he had a "special connection" with Libya. And it was an equally well-known fact that Colonel Qaddafi, the head-man dictator of Libya, had close connections with both the PLO and Ayatollah Khomeini. The PLO leaders were also close to the new revolutionary leaders in Iran.

It was obvious at the time that if one wanted to get any messages to the Ayatollah and to his lieutenants in an effort to open up channels of communication, Billy Carter was one possible channel. He was certainly not the best channel. The right way would have been to use the formal channels of the State Department or the clandestine channels of the CIA. Either would have been safer, and might have been more productive.

But like many a president before him, Mr. Carter likes to use his own personal channels of communication in foreign policy. There is a built-in friction between State Department and White House. State Department people are trained to consider the long-term national interest. The White House is sensitive to the political considerations of the moment. The State Department is always trying to get the White House to do things which are politically unpopular, such as Panama Canal treaties.

That is why a president will have his own personal foreign policy people. Woodrow Wilson had Colonel House. Franklin Roosevelt had both his wife, Eleanor, and Harry Hopkins. Richard Nixon had Henry Kissinger. President Carter clings to Zbigniew Brzezinski. The temptation is great to bypass the State Department professionals and use private channels.

The use of brother Billy was inherently unsound because, although "family," he has no diplomatic experience. The use of him did not help the hostages. It did establish a link between the President and a person who became a paid agent of Libya without realizing until too late that this was a matter that had to be declared openly.

It is a sad story, but also an understandable one. It all began with the decision to let the ex-Shah come to New York for medical treatment.